

# THE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTED/DECONSTRUCTED: INTERPRETING NARRATIVE DECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN DAPHNE

MARLATT'S ANA HISTORIC

RITUSHMITA SHARMA

Research Scholar, Department of English, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India

## ABSTRACT

*Ana Historic (1988) by Daphne Marlatt is a well-known novel for its deployment of disruptive narrative strategies. This novel is unique for its attempt at shattering the illusion of a coherent narrative by defamiliarising our accepted notions of femininity, gender and sexual identity. The story line of this novel revolves around a protagonist called Annie Anderson, who moulds her life story not only from the preconceived traditional images of women, but also ventures into exploring new possible identities that she imagines for herself. It is praiseworthy that Marlatt deconstructs the narrative and linguistic structures to make possible the realisation of an independent woman's identity. Marlatt via her protagonist breaks the traditional stereotype of women as passive, docile or familial. In fact, she falsifies the notion of heterosexuality as the only norm which pushes both men and women into one framework by ruling out other complex constructions of gender and sexual identity. Thus, this research study aims to interrogate the heterosexual matrix by calling into question the concept of gender as stable category. Marlatt shows how gender can be conceived as fluid category by calling into question conventional understandings towards it.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Femininity, Gender, Identity & Heterosexuality*

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## INTRODUCTION

Daphne Marlatt is an Australian born Canadian author and the writer of famous novel *Ana Historic*. In her novel, she has brought together questions about the truth, the fictiveness of history, the fictiveness of literary texts and the role of imagination in the creation of stories. The novel follows a viscerally experimental and gorgeously postmodern glimpse at queer Canadian women's history. The novel is postmodern and experimental because the novel undoubtedly is, but this is not so much a warning as an invitation to watch Marlatt deftly and beautifully use words to carve out a space for queer women not only in Canadian history, but also in contemporary Canadian society. This carving needs to take the form of Marlatt's disarming poetics and rhizomatic, circular style in order to do the difficult and necessary work of counteracting the overwhelmingly masculinist history that the protagonist Annie begins to understand. Thus, this research would open up analysis for understanding how Annie shattered the illusion of patriarchy that had a strong grip over her from the very beginning of her childhood. While doing so, she proposes her own theoretical analysis of gender to counteract patriarchy as a myth and its politics to retain onto power.

## Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this research analysis is to show Annie, the protagonist breaks the traditional

stereotype of women as passive, docile or familial. The study also aims to interrogate the heterosexual matrix by calling into question the concept of gender as stable category. While doing this, we understand how gender can be conceived as fluid category by calling into question conventional understandings towards it.

### Research Methodology

The paper follows both analytical and descriptive method and is based on both primary and secondary sources. The text *Ana Historic* serves as the primary source, and secondary sources are based on some other reference books related to the present study of analysis.

### ANALYSIS

The labyrinthine structure of the text, which may be entered but not easily traversed, text whose passageways pose no easy passage, wind back on each other and forward, or end abruptly in confining walls, text a woman is finding her way through, hesitant which way to proceed, glancing at images off walls which offer dubious reflections at best maze of dead ends (in which she finds herself?)

---Daphne Marlatt, "Here in the Labyrinth: Reading/Writing Theory"

*Ana Historic* is a highly experimental text for it presents us with challenges to subvert what is considered to be 'normal', or 'established'. Marlatt here uses language as a weapon or creative device "to salvage the wreckage of language so freighted with phallogocentric values it must be subverted or reshaped . . ." (Marlatt: 1991, 10). For instance, there is no syntactic use of punctuation, use of run-on sentences without a period or sometimes a period is set after every word etc. Throughout the text, Marlatt plays with her use of personal pronouns and subject positions. She delineates confusing identities and thereby questions the positions of characters, readers and author by saying ". . . she who is you/ or me/ 'i'/ address this to" (129).

The novel begins with "Who's There? she was whispering. Knock knock" (9) in the first sentence which recurs throughout *Ana Historic* as well as symbolic of Marlatt's poetic style. This describes her style of discovering the counter-reality hidden within the assumed reality. Moreover, the reality is a distorted and discursively constructed and that language can never represent one single reality but multiple realities. Therefore, Marlatt makes use of a linguistic style that defies the rational teleology and linearity of language rooted in patriarchal ideology. So in order to subvert the patriarchal language, Marlatt employs language that is modelled upon female body.

The opening question by Annie Anderson introduces us to her search for alternate identities, both outside and within. For instance, Annie often awakes at night by her own "fear-defiant child voice" (9). This implies that her awakening to her own voices is an interrogation of past and future identities alongside her effort to break free from the traditional gender roles. Thus Annie begins to look back into her past to understand better the dynamics that forced her into the current roles as a grown-up. Annie is the wife of Richard, a history professor to whom she in order to marry dropped her graduation. But now she wishes to abandon her roles as a dutiful wife and his research assistant. Another crucial event in this context is the death of Annie's mother's recent death. According to Annie, her mother committed suicide because she got stuck in stereotypical notions of femininity and lacked the imagination for other possible lives. As a result, Annie fears that her life might veer in a similar direction like her mother's, and therefore, she tries to break free from the

stereotypical patterns of femininity.

This process of socialization in Annie can be traced back to her mother Ina who taught her “the great cover-story inherit in fashion and make-up. You taught me how I was supposed to look, the feminine act” (60). Annie remembers how her mother herself practiced the learned look of femininity everyday by looking into the mirror reflecting as an ideal woman of men’s wishes and desires but not her own. Also the time when Annie behaved in unfeminine ways as a girl, her mother would address her as a ‘tomboy.’ Linguistically the word ‘tomboy’ denotes a girl who unnaturally behaves like a boy. So here it has been implied that there lies hidden ideology beneath naming as well which hints at the binary between boys and girls as polar opposites and attaches specific characteristics to them that not only reflect differences but also hierarchies. Thus Ina serves as the mouthpiece of tradition which have restricted Annie within the confined boundaries of femininity. Part of the novel traces Annie’s remembrance of her childhood where we find that how she had been asked to repress her feelings and desires. She is made to believe that girls are passive and boys are active. Rather than being confront with her fear, she is taught to adjust her behaviour accordingly. From this we understand that, though Ina is long dead, but her presence is still continued in her daughter.

In the course of the novel, we find how Annie creates an exemplar for herself out of the fragmented story of a historical woman. On one occasion, she stumbles upon the name of a lady called Mr. Richards in the Vancouver city archives. Annie realises that Mr. Richards was a young widow who came to British Columbia in 1873 as a school teacher. With that much of information, history wrote her off, as after her wedding with Mr. Springer she disappeared from the public records into the private life of a married woman. As there was no further information available, Annie starts imagining Mrs. Richard’s life by inventing a journal where she would inscribe her thoughts about Mrs. Richards. By referring to the idea of journal writing, Marlatt cunningly points out the tradition of journal writing as an alternative history of women’s writing, or can be assumed as a counter-history to the factual version of historiography. Annie Anderson through her form of journal writing baptizes Mr. Richards by giving her a name called Ana and by doing so, the protagonist forges a new identity for herself in the future.

Marlatt through her protagonist Annie creates the character of Ana Richards and invites the readers to excavate gender relations that enforce dichotomies. During Ana Richards’s time, as Marlatt points out, the word ‘Lady’ illustrates how gender differences are inevitably grounded in material differences as women are economically dependent on marriages. Annie imagines how one day Ana wrote in her diary: “I cannot keep only to drawing rooms and the School! I am not a proper Lady Perhaps” (32). So here it has been indicated that during Ana’s time, either women assumes the position of lady without having agency or they are relegated to the periphery of the society. Thus the concept of ‘Lady’ turns out to be an identity trap because it promises status at the cost of suppressing the body. In case of Annie’s mother too, she remembers how hard her mother tried to hold on to the rigid role of a ‘Lady.’ Infact her mother committed suicide because she could not abandon her ideal of being ‘a Lady.’

Rigid oppositions always lead to the exclusion and persecution of whatever is considered to be ‘the other’. Deviant women for example are considered as outsiders, as Annie remembers from her own schooldays “tramp was a word nice girls used to brand those outside their group tramp, slut, bitch” (34). Women participate in denouncing those who do not fit into the gender norm because they have internalized the silent oppositions and the fear of being considered abnormal. Marlatt time and again explores the lack of support among mothers and daughters. For instance, Annie says to her mother, “You taught us your fear, you taught us what you knew about a world where even uncles were not to be

trusted. You grew more afraid as our sexuality came budding to the fore . . . ladies keep to the background. Ladies are the soothing background their men come home to" (34).

Marlatt looks at how patriarchy invested ideology factualises gender identities by making them appear natural. The writer here presupposes that women are framed into a "feminine act" because the gaze/or the male gaze is patriarchal and aligned towards a heterosexual imperative.

Using her marginalized position as a woman and lesbian, she interrogates the mainstream gender codes. This procedure is an ironic and self-reflexive inversion as she is aware that her selection is unreal and incomplete as selection is made through a patriarchal lens. By pointing out the ideological manipulations at work, Marlatt destroys the illusion that patriarchy try to sustain. Thus, Marlatt shows gender to be an ideological apparatus that produces gendered bodies and identities.

Marlatt suggest that the patriarchal gaze constructs the supposedly natural female body by teaching women how they ought to move. In this context, we can refer to Annie who speaks about her growing into a woman. She says:

. . . attaining the sort of grace i was meant to have as a body marked woman's. as if it were a brand name. as if there were a standard shape (as remote as the stars ) to trim my individual lamp to , gain the stamp of approval for: 'feminine' . . . (52)

Apart from all this, Marlatt looks for the ways to break the rigid codes of femininity from within. In order to do so, she steps into the historical frame and opens it up by adding repressed stories. For instance, Annie uses the story of historic persona Ana Richards as a test space for herself. She literally experiments withshifting the gaze to create another narrative version of Ana's life. She further explores the possibility that Ana Richards found ways out of restrictive gender patterns. Annie needs a foremother and fancies that Ana met Birdie Stewart who—in historical fact—arrived on the same boat with Ana from England to Vancouver and became Gastown's first saloon keeper. For a woman at the time this was probably not the most respected, but certainly a fairly independent position. Birdie offers a transcendence of the frame "lady," which Ana is caught up in. Marlatt shows how her protagonist imagines a different identity for herself by testing it out in a third-person narrative first. When Annie imagines another encounter between Birdie and Ana, she muses: "you reflected differently in Birdie's eyes. you see yourself, or a part of yourself you hadn't known before" (108). Annie imagines how Birdie teases Ana with daydreams of travel and thus with different possible identities for women. When Ana looks unbelievably Birdie says: "'you can't even imagine?'" Imagination is stressed as the primary force out of oppressive life stories. By stirring her imagination, Birdie makes Ana step out of the male gaze. Annie tells of how Ana in response to her question turns to Birdie "caught in the act, you have caught yourself turning in Birdie's eyes" (109). Ana is framed in a different act, in this very instance. She is reflected in and acknowledged by another woman's gaze. With her narrative, Annie adds a new possibility to her and the reader's imagination. Constructing this other story helps Annie to transcend internalized attitudes.

Annie widens the scope of Ana's story because she does not want to erase the potential other life stories. She refuses to finalize Ana's story into one of marriage. Annie thinks:

. . . what if that life should close in on [Ana] like the lid of a hope chest? . . . if all the other selves she might be were erased—secret diarist, pioneer pianist, travelling companion to Birdie Stewart—unvalidated, unacceptable, in short. because they

weren't the right words. try artist, try explorer—prefaced always by lady, no, it wasn't a choice anyonesane would make. to fly in the face of common sense, social conventions, ethics — the weight of history. to fly. . . . (146)

The convention through which Ana is framed, which determines her body and behavior limits the possible selves she might be, as it brackets the potential of an explorer or artist. Entering a lesbian relationship would be “to fly in the face of common sense, social conventions, ethics.” The structure of the last sentence “to fly . . . ” evokes a longing and opens a gap for other desires. Marlatt takes one piece of information, the fact that Ana Richards gave piano lessons for a while and puts it to scandalous or monstrous use by creating the story of a lesbian relationship on the male dominated logging frontier in the nineteenth century.

Marlatt in her novel makes use of many allusions related to monsters, especially to the monster created in the text of Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. She in this regard plays on a stereotypical image of women who deviates from the gender norm and are seen as monsters. Initially in case of Annie she feared transgressive gender acts which she inherited from her mother. But very soon Annie realised that what is considered or seen to be monstrous is the very ideology which keeps women within bounds by evoking the terror of patriarchal ideology. Annie however, comes to transcend her fear by writing the imagined story of Ana Richards who encourage her to take the ‘monstrous leap of imagination.’ When Annie starts imagining the other possibility of Ana Richard's fate, namely a lesbian relationship, she says to Zoe who encourages her, “but this is a monstrous leap of imagination, i protest. (whose voice is that?) so be monstrous then, [Zoe] says. but the monster is always someone/something else. the real monster is fear, or the monster is what i always feared as real” (AH, 135). The monster in the beginning stands for the fear to transgress given notions of femininity, but the more Annie realizes that these notions are illusions which are only constructed as realities, the more she can let go of them.

Allusions to the monster Frankenstein refer to the monstrosity of assertive femininity and to what Johnson has called the “monstrousness of selfhood” in women's writing. In her essay “My Monster, My Self,” Johnson reads Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a parable for autobiographies written by women: “What is at stake in Frankenstein's workshop of filthy creation is precisely the possibility of shaping a life in one's own image: Frankenstein's monster can thus be seen as a figure for autobiography as such” (Johnson 1987, 146). Johnson claims that for women the notion of selfhood is a monstrous idea because “the very notion of a self, the very shape of human life stories, has always, from Saint Augustine to Freud, be modeled on the man” (Johnson 1987, 154). What Annie is grappling with in writing her own story is to imagine stories against the grain, to model a life story that runs counter to historiography, or to the heterosexual matrix she grew up with.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thus to conclude that Annie is “Coming to writing” (an expression used by Helen Cixous) her fictive autobiography and she is coming out as a lesbian. This implies that Annie comes to embrace the possibility of a lesbian relationship with Zoe as a choice. She looks for unveiling the hidden possibilities of the lesbian love which would shift the frame of reference from an androcentric to a women centered perspective. Annie says to herself: “it isn't Frankenstein you're looking for but some elusive sense of who you might be: she, unspoken and real in the world, running ahead to embrace it. She is writing her desire to be, in the present tense, retrieved from silence” (46–47). Annie wants to affirm and voice the monstrous other possibility of female selfhood. She gets over her fear by writing Ana's story.” At the end of the novel Annie finally realizes: “actually Frankenstein was the man who created him . . . and now we call the monster by his

name. a man's name for man's fear of the wild, the uncontrolled. that's where she lives" (142). Thus, Marlatt implies, that just like the narrative hides its ideological impetus, the notion of abnormal or monstrous femininity is an ideological fiction. So it can be said that the process of identity formation is completely social and created by the mainstream culture. Marlatt's text *Ana Historic* wants to queer gender and sexual identity and in its confusing structure the text mirrors the escape route of her protagonist as she does not remain caught up in the same structures but aims to deconstruct it.

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